DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 300 894 EA 020 410

AUTHOR Al-Rubaiy, Abdul A.; Al-Zubaidy, Khawla F.
TITLE Examining a Literacy Campaign in the Middle East: Iraq's Recent Experience.
PUB DATE Mar 88
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Comparative and International Education Society (Atlanta, GA, March 17-20, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Basic Education; Adult Literacy; Arabs; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; Foreign Culture; Functional Literacy; International Education; Islamic Culture; Literacy; *Literacy Education; *Middle Eastern History; *Middle Eastern Studies
IDENTIFIERS *Iraq; Literacy Campaigns

ABSTRACT

This paper documents Iraq's efforts to conquer the problem of illiteracy brought about by an inadequate educational system, lack of incentive to become literate, low standard of living, and low levels of school attendance. A general historical perspective of education in Iraq and the Arab world is presented followed by a tracing of the history and degree of success of the Iraqi literacy campaign launched by the Baath Socialist Party (BASP) in 1978. Appended are 12 references. (Author/SI)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED300894

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

A. Al-Rubaiy

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

EXAMINING A LITERACY CAMPAIGN IN THE MIDDLE EAST: IRAQ'S RECENT EXPERIENCE

Abdul A. Al-Rubaiy
The University of Akron

Khawla F. Al-Zubaidy
Ministry of Education
Baghdad, Iraq

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
Comparative and International Education Society
Atlanta, Georgia, March 17-20, 1988

A DRAFT

No part of this paper may be published
without the permission of the authors.

EA020410

Introduction and Background

Until the advent of western influence in the 19th century, education in Iraq, as elsewhere in the Middle East, was dominated by the Islamic tradition of religious and classical learning. The elementary schools' curriculum was based on memorization of the Koran; reading and writing received secondary emphasis. Higher education, available only to a small minority, was concerned largely with Islamic theology and mastery of classical Arabic. The Christian and Jewish minorities maintained their own schools with a comparable emphasis on religious training. The prestige attached to religious learning was reflected in the strong pressure put on even the poorest villager or urban dweller to see that his son acquired at least some formal knowledge of the Koran.

As is commonly known, the 1958 revolution changed Iraq from a monarchy to a republic. During the preceding 40 years, Britain had transformed Iraq into a focus of a political and military force, i.e., the "Baghdad Pact," against Egypt and the rest of the independent Arab countries. This effort met with little success in face of the wishes of the various tribal, religious, and ethnic groups that make up the population of Iraq (Peretz, 1963). Since 1958, the government has been beset with a number of domestic problems and some political instability. It was not until 1980 that elections were held for the National Assembly, elections that had been promised by the amended constitution of 1970.

Of special concern for the present discussion is the National Literacy program in Iraq, which had its beginnings in 1927 with the establishment of a special unit in the Ministry of Education. An upsurge of patriotic awareness and subsequent activities had forced the British to allow the establishment of

evening classes for illiterate citizens. These classes were a blend of the traditional and functional education and were held in school buildings and public places (Supreme Council for Compulsory Literacy, 1980).

Context

The subsequent educational developments in Iraq may be better understood in terms of an historical perspective of education in Iraq and the Arab world. Islamic culture traditionally honored men of learning. men of letters (ulama) were held in high esteem, with formal learning reserved for a privileged few attending the halqat, or "learning circles" of mosque schools. However, from the mid 13th century on, the only lower preparatory training was either private-tutorial or those offered only under local religious auspices, and only a very few were given the opportunity to master the rudiments of literacy. According to Christopher Lucas (1981), "provision of instruction on anything approaching a mass popular basis had to await the emergence of post-colonialist nation-states in the present century and the beginnings of national educational system" (p. 74).

In most of the Arab world, schooling networks have tended to be poorly developed. Currently, one out of every two Arab adults can neither read or write. According to the 1970 UNESCO figures, among those age 15 or older in most Arab states, it was estimated that 73% (60.5% for males and 85.7% among females) were illiterate. This figure represented an improvement over the 81.1% rate prevailing 10 years earlier when an estimated 71.6% of all males and 90.7% of all females were illiterate (UNESCO, 1972). However, the absolute number of adult illiterates had increased, especially among women (Al-Zubaidy, 1980). there is little reason to believe that adult illiteracy has declined in the Arab world, with the possible exclusion of Iraq, over the past decade.

The situation was a little better with respect to the younger Arabs. The literacy rate among those age 10 and older in eight Arab countries supplying data averaged no more than 42% (male, 31%; female, 52%) (Arab Literacy and Adult Education Organization, 1975). This improved situation reflects concerted efforts by such nations as Iraq and Saudi Arabia to improve their school systems. However, in most Arab states there is no compulsory schooling, so that there is a constant inflex of persons who have never attended school.

According to Kedda (1976), the absorption rate of primary schools in the Arab nations studied in 1974 on the average did not exceed 66%. For school-age males, the participation rate ranged from 70% to nearly 100%, with an average of 78%. For females age 10 and under, the initial school attendance rates ranged from a low of 29% to a high of almost 100%, but averaged no more than 47%. Moreover, it was estimated that the overall enrollment rate had actually fallen between 1971-1974 by some 23%, a loss attributable partly to expanding population pressure on overcrowded school facilities.

The school enrollment attrition rate in most Arab countries amounted to as much as 50%in 1974. Of the 66% of the school-age population enrolled in school in the early 1970s, half of them were expected to drop out before obtaining any certificates. Accordingly, one-third of the school-age population could be expected to be educated, with one-third being absolutely untaught, and one-third primary school dropouts. One conclusion from this dilemma is well stated by Lucas (1981): "Clearly, without massive intervention on an unprecedented scale, it appears inevitable illiteracy will continue to impede the Arab quest for regional development and modernization" (p. 76).

The Iraqi Case

A. The Early Period

In the case of Iraq, a nominal educational development took place in 1952 when the Directorate of Fundamental Education and Anti-illiteracy was established. Simultaneously, UNESCO officially declared the start of a literacy proram in Iraq, and in 1965 a National Literacy Committee was set up by the government. It was planned that evening literacy classes would be five days a week throughout the year. However, the programs were ineffective due to lack of adequate enrollment, and that attendance was not compulsory. According to the 1957 census, only 1.3% of the illiterate adults in the 15-45 age group enrolled in this program. According to the official body (SCCNCCL), "Since the adults of the 15-45 age group form the real manpower of any society, more than two-thirds of the manpower Iraq needs in its national development process were dissipated by illiteracy and ignorance" (Supreme Council of the Comprehensive National Campaign for Compulsory Literacy, Baghdad, 1980, p. 1).

High dropout rates and lack of trained teachers contributed to the failure of the literacy programs. Between 1957 and 1965, studies revealed that the number of illiterates in the 15-45 age group had increased by 59% over the 1957 figure. In 1965, 56% of the population was illiterate. Although the Education Act was passed in 1940 making education compulsory, and according to the SCCNCCL, "it had never been put into practice because of the lack of serious endeavor and keenness on the part of the monarchial regime" (p.).

B. Since July 1968

The post-July 17, 1968 period marked a new era when the leading party (BASP) considered literacy to be the basic pillar for all desired changes in the society, especially the elimination of backwardness and exploitation. The

number of primary schools increased during the first 10 years of the Revolution by 71%; secondary schools by 83%, and universities by 19%. Students enrolled in primary schools increased by 107%; 83% for secondary schools; and 110% for university entrants (Al-Zubaidy, 1987).

In 1971, Literacy Law 153 provided for the formation of a Supreme Literacy Board whose function would be to carry out the literacy campaign. In 1973, the Board issued a national plan for the eradication of illiteracy. At that time, 40% of the males in the 15-45 age group were illiterate; the corresponding figure for females was 76%.

The 1974 program concentrated on reading, writing, and arithmetic, and on vocational training. Primers were prepared for workers, farmers, soldiers, and women. The peasants and trade unions had their own classes, also. As if to underscore its seriousness, literacy was made a condition for employment in government positions. However, a major problem still was the enrollment and dropout rates. Illiteracy remained a major obstacle despite the great strides taken forward. At its eighth Regional Congress in January 1974, the BASP conceded that gains in literacy were grossly inadequate. The official report issued by the Congress acknowledged that the non-compulsory aspect of primary education in Iraq helped keep illiteracy alive. It concluded that primary schooling should be compulsory in Iraq. According to the political report:

> The illiteracy of vast sections of the population, especially in rural areas, is one of the most formidable obstacles to the political, economic, and social progress of the country. As long as illiteracy rates remain high, it will be impossible to raise the standards of the people or to build a progressive society capable of tackling the complex problems of our era. (pp. 167-168)

By 1976 it was evident to the government that its overall development plans were being plagued by basic infrastructural weaknesses. In particular, there was the lack of a skilled trained workforce. It was clear that avoiding the dependence on foreign labor could be achieved only by training the Iraqi

technicians and experts so badly needed for national development. Later that year, the Council for Compulsory Education and Adult Education was established for the purpose of improving literacy among the nation's post school-age population. The movement seemingly reflected the spirit of a full-scale military offensive.

Most importantly, enabling legislation was passed in 1976 to implement Article 27 of the 1970 Interim Constitution calling for free, universal and compulsory primary schooling (Directorate General of Educational Planning, Baghdad, 1977). To become effective in 1978, Public Law 118 (enacted in 1976) mandated free compulsory education for all 6- to 15-year-olds. The law covered a six-year primary school and a three-year intermediate level of secondary education. During the interim period, preparatory measures were taken for implementation, including textbooks, school buildings, and trained teachers in crash courses. In May 1978, the National Comprehensive Campaign for Literacy was launched by the BASP, "making the eradication of illiteracy a national issue to which all the country's energies on both official and popular levels would be oriented." The President of the Republic was the Supreme Chairman of the Campaign, clearly an indication of the seriousness of the effort. Regular attendance of literacy classes was compulsory for all illiterate citizens. Punitive measures were taken against those who failed to comply with the law.

Five specific objectives were stated: first, to teach reading, writing, and arithmetic; second, to develop professional skills; third, to endow illiterates with cultural, economic, and social standards of living; fourth, to enhance patriotic and national consciousness among illiterates; and sixth, to promote the illiterates' interest in following the educational process thereafter (The Battles of Letters in Iraq, p. 23).

The target population was almost two and a quarter million (2,212,626) illiterates in the age group 15-45, or about 18% of the total population of Iraq. The number of female illiterates was over twice that of males (1,535,936 vs. 676,690). It also represents 50% of the 15-45 age range in the country. This situation points to the urgent need to educate that 50%, since it will form a pool of potential manpower if educated.

An intensive publicity campaign was waged for the purpose of familiarizing the public with the objectives and seriousness of the campaign. In addition to radio and TV broadcasts, exhibitions, songs, and fairs were employed to depict the battle against ignorance. By December 1978, over 1,300,000 illiterates showed up at the centers, 62% more than the anticipated 833,000. At that time there were more than 14,000 centers; one year later this figure had nearly doubled. By the end of the first year of the Campaign (which was initially planned to last for three years but was later reduced to two), the enrollment rose to over 2 million, leaving only about 155,000 illiterates not absorbed into the program.

For the basic level, there are two textbooks: a primer and an arithmetic book, along with a teaching guide to help teachers in their task. The books are written in both Arabic and Kurdish, to accommodate the local language in the Kurdish region in northern Iraq. For the complementary level, ("Takmil"), there are five textbooks: an arithmetic book and four readers for workers, farmers, soldiers, and women, respectively. In addition to books, special teaching aids are provided, such as audiovisual materials in the form of flash cards, posters, charts, video-taped lessons, broadcasts on national television, and special cassettes for drivers and seamen.

The program utilized all available schools and public buildings such as mosques, halls, and local administration facilities. Classes were also held

aboard ships for seamen. Special kindergartens were provided during classes for the female literacy centers to care for students' children. Special courses were held for administrative personnel and for the literacy teachers. The teachers were recruited from among primary school teachers, governmental department officials, and university graduates. Graduates of literacy centers were eligible to enter the newly created "popular schools," which prepared the student for secondary school education. The official six years to cover the primary school curriculum was considerably reduced for such mature students; it was now possible to enroll in a second school after only 37 months in primary schools.

C. A New Era

By September 1980, Iraq had entered a new era, as illiteracy was well on its way to extinction. According to the latest figures stated by the coordinator of the campaign in Al-Thawra daily newspaper, Iraq managed to liberate 1,588,997 citizens from their ignorance and were made literate. This figure represents 76.4% of the 2.3 million involved (Sayala, 1983, p. 3).

By way of contrasting this literacy campaign, it may be noted that the strategy used was tailor made to Iraq's unique environment. It adapted a number of techniques used by other countries in their literacy programs, modifying them to suit its own unique purposes. For example, it did not rely on volunteers for teachers as had been the case in Cuba (Morales, 1981). Teachers were recruited from regular school personnel, since voluntary/ revolutionary zeal was recognized as a poor substitute for effective teaching of the kind most likely to be found in an experienced professional teacher.

Literacy programs in other parts of the world had often relied on non-formal learning networks. In Iraq, the target population amounted to 2.3 million people, and, accordingly, a more systematic approach seemed necessary.

Formal classes and a system of a school-based instruction were instituted. The program was built on an educational infrastructure previously established, namely the local schools then existing in most towns and villages. Thus, the instruction took place in schools already in operation. In some instances it was necessary to set up learning centers in factories, army barracks, or at other work sites.

Administrative Structure

There was no attempt to exclude the state's official school bureaucracy. The existing educational administrative apparatus was involved directly. The National Literacy Law of 1978 required that the Supreme Council for Compulsory Literacy be chaired by the Minister of Education. Other members of the Council included the deputy minister, ranking officials from the ministries (higher education, planning, defense, and information and culture), trade federation representatives, party officials, and delegates from student groups and other mass organizations. This step provided all segments of society a degree of broad representation. The Supreme Council itself is mainly made up of general policy-making body, with specific executive functions delegated to a smaller secretariat-general within the council. The Supreme Council is connected with a network of regional literacy councils or committee functioning in each of Iraq's 18 provincial governates. These agencies carry out council directives, adapt policy to local needs, and monitor progress in their provinces. What has emerged finally is a complex, hierarchical decision-making structure, highly centralized at the top, but with relative flexibility at lower levels to permit a needed degree of local autonomy and initiative (The Battle of Letters in Iraq, p. 81).

The campaign has relied on peer pressure and official exhortation to gain compliance with the National Literacy Law. The Law provides for punitive measures for those who fail to abide by it. According to Lucas (1981):

> Anyone failing to register after official notification to do so may be fined. Should a person not appear within a 3-day interval following the start of classes, he or she is liable for a second fine. An individual's outright refusal to attend class carries the threat of a week's custody in confinement. Repeated absence from class also constitutes a legal offense punishable by jail sentence. (p.)

Objectives Achieved

In addition to the so-called three Rs, the curriculum of the literacy classes emphasizes political awareness, especially of the achievements and aspirations of the BASP, national unity, revolutionary struggle, and the kinship of all the Arab peoples. Economic goals involve the concept of dignity and utility of labor, modernization of industry and agriculture, and individual duty to produce more efficiently and consume more rationally. Social objectives encompass familial duties, community welfare, productive leisure, and appreciation of the aesthetic and spiritual values of the Arabic-Islamic heritage.

Classes were staggered in order to allow attendance during off-work periods. Each class met for two hours daily, five days a week, for a total of ten hours including study periods. Although the quality of instruction varied depending on the teacher's ability and experience, its overall competence seemed adequate. Classes often were informal in nature, with a good deal of discussion among participants. Methods of instruction were flexible, with both phonetic and "whole word" or "sight recognition" methods being utilized regularly to help the students absorb the alphabets and subtleties of Arabic calligraphy. Very helpful were the evening television broadcasts which supplement the regular classes for the primary (base-stage) learners.

Lucas feels that the students were serious in purpose and exhibited a sense of pride and accomplishment, that those attending literacy centers felt they were thereby contributing much to the welfare and betterment of society and themselves, e.g. many women became more marriageable.

Although attendance at the learning centers was indeed quite high, the government's assertion that illiteracy in Iraq has been all but eliminated by the end of 1980 needs to be carefully evaluated. Four years is scarcely enough time for a nation to move from about 50% illiteracy to almost total literacy, even if only the relevant and teachable age group are considered. More objective measure is needed concerning the degree of literacy achieved. According to the recent figures released, the campaign success rate was 76.4%. Considering the size and complexity of the task coupled with the unfortunate intervention of an extended war, even if a modicum of literacy has been achieved for the majority of the population, a giant step forward had been taken.

Summary

A number of striking features may be noted with reference to the Iraqi literacy movement. First, its intensity and speed might very well be something of a near milestone in the literature of literacy drives. Nearly one in six of the nation's population has been touched. As was personally observed by Al-Zubaidy, there is an ongoing evaluation of the program, and feedback from this process is used to suitably amend and improve the instruction provided. Periodic conferences are held for such purposes. Another impressive feature is the combined use of public media and the existing school apparatus on behalf of a common goal. The campaign is characterize by its deep sense of purpose and coherence rising out of ideological foundations rooted in nationalism and Arab/Islamic unity.

It is still too soon to evaluate the program in terms of achieving a high degree of adult literacy. A person recorded as having passed a test may still not be fully literate in the best sense of the word. Nor can one rule out some degree of inaccurate recording by provincial officials or administrators

in order to enhance their performance. However, gains are real, and hundreds of thousands of former illiterates have indeed acquired crucial basic learning skills. Many others have gone beyond. Whatever their attainments, they will surely form a solid base from which to educate those who follow them.

One basic literacy can be said to have been achieved; the next step is the enhancement of "the public schools," designed to train native talents to take over the various positions vital to the nation's economic welfare. According to the figures published in the "Iraq" daily newspaper in June 1984, the number of graduates from these schools amounted to over a half a million (560,346). Of those, 473-679 were female and 86,666 were male. Self-sufficiency will thereby be furthered considerably by such progress.

Other Arab states are not as fortunate as Iraq in having oil reserves capable of financing an ambitious literacy drive. Nevertheless, Iraq is an example of what can be accomplished through resolve, commitment, leadership and realistic planning, ingredients even more important than financial means. Indeed, other experience in using education to promote national development goals clearly shows that "adequate finance alone is not a panacea, even in the short term," according to Presley (1984, p. 68).

References

Al-Zubaidy, K. F. M. (1980). The eradication of illiteracy in Iraq. Advanced Diploma in Education dissertation, University of Nottingham Library.

Al-Zubaidy, K. F. M. (1987). Education and economic development: The case of Iraq. Submitted for publication, Education for Development, University of Cardiff.

Battle of letters in Iraq. (1980). Baghdad: The Supreme Council of the Comprehensive National Campaign for Compulsory Literacy.

Keddah, O. M. (1976). Toward a rational education for women in the Arab world. International Institute for Adult Literacy Methods, p. 33.

Lucas, C. J. (1981, February). Arab illiteracy and mass literacy campaign in Iraq. Comparative Education Review, 25(1), 74-76.

Morales, A. P. (1981). The literacy campaign in Cuba. Harvard Educational Review, 51(1), 31-39.

Peretz, D. (1963). The Middle East today. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Political report of the Baath Arab Socialist Party's eight regional congress. (1974, January). Baghdad, Iraq: Dar Al-Thawra Press.

Presley, J. R. (1984). Education for Development, p. 68.

Republic of Iraq. (1977-1980). Ministry of Education: The Supreme Council for Compulsory Literacy and Adult Education. Baghdad, Iraq.

Sayala, N. Y. (1983, February 11). Strategic stand for the question of literacy and adult education in Iraq. Al-Thawra Newspaper. (Translated from Arabic).

UNESCO. (1972). Literacy 1969-71: Progress achieved in literacy throughout the world. Paris: UNESCO.

Note

The authors wish to thank the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Planning of Iraq for supporting this work and for providing necessary information.